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Lucia A Keegan 03/20/2007 09:48:25 AM From DB/Inbox: Lucia A Keegan

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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 001066

SIPDIS

FROM USMISSION UNESCO PARIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [UNESCO](#) [SCUL](#) [IS](#)  
SUBJECT: (SBU) UNESCO -- INFORMATION MEETING ON TECHNICAL MISSION  
TO THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM

¶1. (U) Summary and background: Six Arab state members of UNESCO have requested an extraordinary and unprecedented special meeting of the UNESCO Executive Board to discuss Israeli archaeological work on the ramp leading to the al-Mughrabi Gate on the Temple Mount. At the invitation of the Israeli government, UNESCO's Director General dispatched a technical mission to report on conditions at this sensitive World Heritage site. The mission's report was issued on March 12 and is available on the UNESCO website - [www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org).

¶2. (U) Summary and background continued. In a surprisingly brief and low-key information meeting on March 19 for UNESCO delegations, the technical mission reported that while the digging had caused no damage, they recommended that the Israelis halt work until there are consultations with other concerned parties like the Government of Jordan and until there is a clear plan for continued work on the site. There was no clear sign about what steps the Israelis might take next in advancing the repair and reconstruction of the ramp to the Temple Mount. Both the Israeli and Palestinian representatives (the Palestinian observer heads the Arab group at UNESCO) used measured language, helping to keep the tone of the meeting calm while conveying different messages. Delegates respected the Director General's request not to turn the information meeting into a debate on whether a special session of the Executive Board should be held, and it remains unclear what decision will be taken by the Executive Board's Chairman following the Executive Board Bureau meeting scheduled for Wednesday, 21 March. US Ambassador Oliver sits on the Bureau. End summary.

¶3. (U) Today's information meeting presided over by Director General Matsuura was held to review the report on the UNESCO Mission to Jerusalem related to the archaeological work undertaken on the access ramp to the Mughrabi Gate, 27 Feb-2 March, 2007. Matsuura began by explaining that the Old City of Jerusalem was

placed on the World Heritage List after being nominated by Jordan, and is also on the World Heritage "Danger" list. He briefly went over the timeline, following the start of excavation work by the Israelis, which led to an increase in tensions in early February, prompting his decision to send a technical mission to assess the nature of the work in progress around the Mughrabi Gate. The technical mission's report was received by the Director General on their return, and published on 12 March.

¶4. (U) The Director General said that the report, while easing some fears about the work and the state of the ramp, also highlighted some problems that he said UNESCO must address urgently. Matsuura said "given UNESCO's mandates, we cannot afford to fail," making it clear he understands the importance of UNESCO both staking its claim to cultural issues within the UN system, yet doing its best to keep the issue from becoming politicized, noting that that is the General Assembly's work in New York. He also twice referred to consultations he has had on this issue with Secretary General Ban.

¶5. (U) Assistant Director General for Culture, Francoise Riviere added that no work has been done inside the Haram es-Sharif, and that the work did not threaten the Al-Aqsa Mosque in any way. She explained that the Israeli Antiquities Authority (IAA) had described the work being done as "preventative archeology", and said that they reported the work could last up to six months. At this point it is not clear whether the work will simply fortify the ramp, or if a bridge will be built. Riviere noted that the report states clearly that the technical mission had found that the work does respect professional norms. The current work underway, according to the IAA is to maintain the solidity of the structure.

¶6. (U) Riviere called for the work now underway to stop, and called for consultations among all concerned parties. She then noted the five recommendations proposed by the technical mission:

- The Government of Israel should be asked to comply with its obligations regarding archeological excavations and heritage conservation in World Heritage sites such as the Old City of Jerusalem and, in particular, with Decision 30 COM.34 adopted by the World Heritage Committee in Vilnius in July 2006 on this matter;

- The Government of Israel should be asked to stop immediately the archeological excavations, given that the excavations that had been undertaken were deemed to be sufficient for the purpose of assessing the structural conditions of the pathway;

- The Government of Israel should then clearly define the final design of the access structure, whose principal aim should be to restore the Mughrabi pathway without any major change to its structure and shape, in order to maintain the values of authenticity and integrity of the site. A clear work plan thereon should be communicated to the World Heritage Committee in the shortest possible time;

- The Government of Israel should be asked to engage immediately a consultation process with all concerned parties, in particular the authorities of the Waqf and of Jordan, the latter having signed a peace agreement on 26 October 1994, and agree upon a plan of action before taking any further action and decision thereon;

- This process should be supervised by an international team of experts coordinated by UNESCO and involving in particular structural engineers, specialized in archeological consolidation works, in order to ensure the most appropriate solution for the restoration of the Mughrabi pathway.

¶7. (U) The Palestinian observer to UNESCO, Elias Sanbar, spoke first, on behalf of the Arab Group. He said that the key concepts that are guiding the group's actions and proposals are "urgency" and "status quo". Calling the matter a "complex political situation," Sanbar said that it is important to remember that East Jerusalem is an occupied territory, and that this fact cannot be removed from the character of this place. He also noted that Jerusalem is part of joint agreement concluded between Israel and the Palestinians at Oslo. He said that each and every time a change is made in Jerusalem, it alters future negotiations on the final territorial status of the city.

¶8. (U) Sanbar also noted Item 6 from the New Delhi Accords that, according to him, says parties shall refrain from undertaking any archeological excavations in occupied territories. He added that Jerusalem must be maintained in its present state. He asked that the Mission's five recommendations "assume concrete form" and be implemented.

¶9. (U) Sanbar then requested that an "extraordinary" session of the Executive Board be held, so that delegates could proceed to discuss these issues. Sanbar then mentioned the planned museum project, the "House of Tolerance" that he said is expected to be built on the oldest Arab cemetery in Jerusalem. Sanbar went on to say that he had visited Jerusalem and came back with a sense of urgency, given what he saw as a deteriorating situation on the ground, which he described as "very worrisome." He also said that he felt he had confirmation that the Israelis would not take any decision without consultations with the Jordanians.

¶10. (U) Sanbar said that given the succession of problems, he is convinced that of the need for a special session of the Executive Board to have an in-depth discussion on the Old City of Jerusalem. He went on to say that the call for a special session was endorsed by the Secretary General of the Arab League and Arab Foreign Ministers.

¶11. (U) In his closing comments, Sanbar said that he understood that UNESCO is not the forum for resolving the Israeli-Arab conflict or the future of Jerusalem. He said, however, that he requests three things:

- Clarify and review the state of the site;
- Protection. Consider joint efforts to protect the site, owing to these repeated problems;
- Prevention. Ensure a constructive spirit and dialogue and not worry about politicization.

¶12. (U) The Director General then intervened saying that UNESCO must accept the political status quo, as we are not to engage in debates on political issues. He added that that is why he is in constant touch with New York on this subject. Matsuura then said that the issue of whether or not to hold a special session of the Executive Board is a matter for decision by the Chairman of the Executive Board who was scheduled to arrive in Paris later in the day. Finally, Matsuura specifically asked that delegates not use this information meeting to debate the question of whether a special session of the Executive Board should or should not be held.

¶13. (U) The Israeli ambassador, David Kornbluth, then spoke, thanking the DG for his efforts and the Palestinian delegate for the "tenor of his remarks, if not the entirety of the content."

¶14. (U) Kornbluth noted that the technical mission had been "invited to Israel" in the spirit of diplomacy, and given Israel's policy of complete transparency on this issue.

¶15. (U) Kornbluth added that the report confirms that the original concerns regarding the archeological work at the site were unwarranted, and reassured the room that Israel intends to continue to fulfill its commitments under the 1972 World Heritage Convention, "as it has done in the past." He also said that consultations are now going on in Jerusalem "on a wide basis" (though he would not say who was consulting), and that he looks forward to discussions on the subject at the World Heritage Committee meeting in New Zealand. Kornbluth added that "this is a matter of utmost sensitivity for the parties concerned", and that the World Heritage Committee meeting in New Zealand "is the way forward."

¶16. (U) The Indian ambassador spoke on behalf of the Asia-Pacific group at UNESCO (ASPAC) expressing concern about possible damage to the Outstanding Universal Value of the site, and asked the World Heritage Center to send a technical mission to investigate.

¶17. (U) She noted that she welcomes that fact that Israel says a consultation process is starting. Mukherjee also asked that Francisco Bandarin, director of the World Heritage Center provide details for an "action plan" that is being developed for the Old

City. Finally, Mukherjee expressed solidarity with the Arab Group but, notably, said that India (note: not ASPAC) supported the call for a special session of the Executive Board.

¶18. (U) Bandarin spoke briefly, noting that the World Heritage Center is now finalizing an action plan which will be submitted to the World Heritage Committee in June. The DG promised to send out more information on it when it is ready. It has four key elements:

- Detailed and complete map of monuments and housing located in Jerusalem;
- 20 project profiles and sheets;
- Manual for housing conservation;
- Scheme for micro-financing for housing renovation.

¶19. (U) The ambassador from the Dominican Republic intervened briefly to say that UNESCO has an important role to play which is above and beyond the purely political aspects of such an issue.

¶20. (U) The German ambassador, speaking on behalf of the 27 European Union states, welcomed the report of the technical mission. He said that the EU aligns itself with the report's recommendations and said that there must be further debate at UNESCO on this issue, without specifically commenting on the call for a special session of the Executive Board.

¶21. (U) Gabon's ambassador's said that the Africa Group supports the technical mission to Jerusalem, but added that she "won't talk about our position regarding the holding of the special session."

¶22. (SBU) Comment: The Director General chaired what had the potential to be a long and turbulent meeting with a surprisingly firm hand. The Palestinian offered an appealing argument undoubtedly designed to bring undecided delegates on board for the Arab Group's call for a special session of the Executive Board. The Israeli tried to kick the problem back to where many think it should be dealt with - in New Zealand at the next World Heritage Committee meeting in June. At the same time, the timing of the Executive Board Chairman Zhang's return to Paris (for an Executive Board Bureau meeting on Wednesday) and the support of the US, Russian, Japan, and other heavyweights could potentially win the day with a combination of strong arguments and a Chinese strategy to run out the clock. End comment.  
OLIVER